

“Grace, Forgiveness, and Love”

Mark 1:4-5, 9

Luke 7:36-50

Hebrews 4:14-16

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November 3, 2019

Have you ever been wronged by someone? Have you ever been betrayed? Has someone ever violated you? Have you ever been hurt and wounded by someone? I think we all know what these experiences are like. These are some of the most bitter experiences in life.

The question before us today is that of forgiveness. Can we forgive or not? Should we forgive or not? I have to confess that this question hasn't always been an easy one for me to answer. There are so many circumstances in which it seems that forgiveness is either impossible or just plain wrong. So, for example, I often wonder whether the victims of the Holocaust were able to forgive their tormentors? And if they were able to forgive, should they have forgiven them? Can victims of rape forgive their assailants? Should they forgive them or not? Also, I wonder if it makes a difference whether someone who has hurt or betrayed another person is genuinely sorry and asks for forgiveness. It's certainly much harder to forgive someone who isn't even sorry that he or she has caused hurt to another. There is a whole set of complex issues here that I wonder about but have never been able to answer for myself. I'm still wondering.

In the Bible and in the Christian tradition, forgiveness is a prominent theme. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus asks us to pray: “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” Even though the New Testament bears witness that Jesus was without sin, it also reports that he identified with sinners who were in need of God's forgiveness since he experienced everything we go through in life. The Letter to the Hebrews says of Jesus that he was able to sympathize “with our weaknesses” since “in every respect” he was “tested as we are, yet without

sin” (Heb. 4:15). Indeed, the story of his ministry begins with his baptism by John. John’s baptism was a symbol of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). By submitting himself to John’s baptism, Jesus publicly identified himself as a sinner who stood in need of God’s forgiveness.

In the story from Luke’s gospel, Jesus praises the actions of a woman who was known as a sinner. The woman’s extravagant actions of love for Jesus were an expression of her having been forgiven. Jesus says: “I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Luke 7:47). What Jesus means is this: someone who has known the grace of being forgiven is a loving person; but someone who has never known or admitted their need for forgiveness is not a loving person.

Let’s break this topic down into two distinct questions: First, what do *I* need to be forgiven for? Second, *whom* do I need to forgive? You can ask yourself these questions too. What, if anything, do *you* need to be forgiven for? And *whom* do you need to forgive?

There are some people who have no consciousness of guilt about anything whatsoever. These people have never seriously thought that perhaps they stand in need of the forgiveness of others. Now perhaps some of them are truly saints who have never done anything wrong. If that’s the case, well, good for them! But I suspect that individuals who have never admitted any wrongdoing are deluding themselves, and that in fact they are guilty of violating others even if they refuse to acknowledge their guilt and ask for forgiveness. I have never met a morally sensitive person who claims to be without guilt and remorse for things they have done in their life. I suppose that’s why the apostle Paul declares, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Nonetheless, there are people who refuse to acknowledge any wrongdoing on their part for anything. At some level I feel sorry for these people, because in their pride and

arrogance they are incapable or unwilling to humble themselves so as to admit to another human being that they were in the wrong. Conscience is our God-given instrument that alerts us to wrongdoing through the presence of guilt. In my observation, people who are guilty in fact but refuse to acknowledge it are actually doing violence to their own persons by denying their guiltiness to themselves. They become hardened and don't feel the pricks of conscience; so they become arrogant and overestimate their moral stature by comparison with others.

This experience is foreign to me, no doubt as a result of my Christian upbringing. I am acutely conscious of what I have done wrong and sincerely desirous of the forgiveness of those persons I have hurt. I often wish I could go back and redo significant portions of my life again in order to undo some of the things I have done. That's what the Bible means when it calls us to repent of our sins: being aware that we have violated the moral fabric of the universe when we have wronged others. It means that God knows when we have sinned and that our sins in relation to other persons are thus also sins against God. Accepting this guilt fully without deluding ourselves is an awful experience, but that's why the message of the gospel is so important, namely, that God is willing to forgive our sins. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who was executed by the Nazis, reminds us, God's forgiveness is not cheap. This is not "cheap grace," but costly grace. To yearn for the forgiveness of others and of God is to realize a truth about oneself that most of us cannot abide, namely, that we are sinners. The reason why genuine forgiveness is not cheap is that we have to be willing to admit to ourselves, to another, and to God that we are in the wrong, that we need forgiveness; and forgiveness is never owed, never deserved, but is always freely given or freely withheld, depending on the person whose forgiveness we desire. Forgiveness is not cheap, but it costs something: it costs those of us who need forgiveness the willingness to be honest with ourselves and to look at ourselves without

rose-colored glasses and admit that we have violated the moral order of the universe. “I am a sinner.” That’s not a pleasant thing to admit about oneself. But it is necessary if there is a true repentance for sin.

Let’s turn to the other question. Whom do I need to forgive or whom do you need to forgive? It follows that if I am hoping others will forgive me that I should be willing to forgive others. Think about this for a moment: I have said that it requires humility to admit that I was wrong, that I have sinned against someone else, and that I need another person’s forgiveness. If so, then why should I be unwilling to forgive another person who sins against me if and when that other person sincerely admits their sin against me and asks for my forgiveness? In Matthew’s gospel Jesus tells a story about a person who pleaded for forgiveness of his own financial debts and was granted forgiveness; but then this same person turned around and refused to forgive another person who owed him money (Matt. 18: 23-35). That’s someone who didn’t grasp the inconsistency of wanting forgiveness for oneself but refusing to grant it to others. That’s why Jesus instructs us not only to pray for our own forgiveness but also to pray for the willingness to forgive others: “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” The basic pattern of the Christian life is set forth in this principle: as sinners who have violated the moral fabric of the universe through our own sins against others, we hope that both they and God will forgive us; and in this spirit of humble repentance, we are ready to forgive others for their sins against us.

I think this point is easy enough to understand. But what about forgiving others who do not acknowledge that they have sinned? What about those who have violated us, betrayed us, hurt us, yet who refuse to acknowledge that they are guilty and have done something wrong? Here things get more complicated. I have to confess I find it much harder to forgive others who

have wronged me but who refuse to acknowledge their guilt. Is repentance a necessary condition of forgiveness? This gets back to my earlier question: Could the victims of the Holocaust forgive their tormentors? Should they forgive them? Can victims of rape or domestic abuse forgive their assailants? Or how about those who murdered loved ones? I had an aunt who was murdered. I wonder what my cousins would say if they were asked whether they've ever been able to forgive their mother's murderer. I have to admit that I remain puzzled about some of these examples. I don't even know what it would mean to speak of forgiveness in some of these circumstances. I'm interested to know what all of you think. My own thinking here is still a bit murky. So, let me just give you some examples of what others have said in this regard.

I once attended a workshop on clergy sexual abuse. As you all know, this is an important issue that has been discussed in recent decades, especially as shocking revelations of clergy misconduct have surfaced, especially in the Roman Catholic Church, but not only in the Roman Catholic Church. Right now, one of our ministers in this annual conference of the United Methodist Church is awaiting trial on the charge of sexual abuse of a minor in his parish. As I sat and listened to victims of clergy sexual abuse speak of their experiences, the question of forgiveness was discussed. The leader of the workshop made an interesting and important distinction. She said that it is possible to forgive someone who violated you in this horrific way, even though that most certainly does not mean that you would ever be expected to let that person back into your life. I was a bit confused by this answer. When I pressed her further on what she meant by forgiveness, she explained that she was talking about something that happens inside a person: letting go of the wrong that was done, not dwelling on the violation, releasing it so that it really belongs to your past and no longer dominates your present experience. I found this to be very insightful since it helped me to understand what it might mean to forgive persons who have

wronged us but have never acknowledged that they have wronged us. On the one hand, you're not obligated to keep those people in your life, but on the other hand, you are no longer consumed by your anger and hatred, by your desire for revenge, by your hope that someone will hurt them as much as they have hurt you. It's like finishing a book and putting it on the shelf. It's always there, and you can't forget it, but you have moved on to read other books that presently occupy your attention. In this case, forgiveness is an internal process of letting go of the intensity of the emotions of anger and hatred that keep you attached to the person who once wronged you. In this case, when someone who wrongs you never acknowledges their guilt, forgiveness is for your sake, not so much for the sake of the other person. After all, what would it mean to say "I forgive you" to someone who doesn't even think they need forgiveness? In the words of one person who explained it: "It took me a long time to understand what it means to forgive someone. I always wondered how I could forgive someone who chose to hurt me. But after a lot of soul searching, I realized that forgiveness is not about accepting or excusing their behavior. It's about letting it go and preventing their behavior from destroying my heart."

My other example comes from Nelson Mandela. Mandela spent 27 years in prison for his struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Imagine having 27 years of your life taken away from you for standing up on behalf of justice for yourself and others like you. I know I'd be bitter and filled with hatred toward those who had done this to me! But Mandela himself said: "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison." Wow! I find this amazing. What a person. What generosity of spirit. I suppose if Mandela can manage letting go of his bitterness and hatred toward those who have wronged him, maybe I can too. I guess the issue is this: whereas sometimes we are locked in a physical prison from which only others can free us, there

are other times when we are locked in an internal prison inside ourselves from which only we can free ourselves. You see, we don't ever have to forgive anybody. Justice does not require it. We are not committing an injustice against anyone whom we choose not to forgive. But it's about who we want to be. We can continue to nurse grudges and fan hatreds inside our heart if we choose. But then what becomes of us, of our souls? I don't want to spend the rest of my life filled with hatred, anger, resentment, and bitterness toward those who have wronged me. I want to let go of all of this so that I am not imprisoned by hatred, anger, resentment, and bitterness.

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday, when we recall the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century initiated by Martin Luther. In this monumental event that forever shattered the religious unity of Western Europe by creating a permanent rift between Catholics and Protestants, Luther rediscovered that forgiveness is at the heart of the gospel message. Somehow that message had become obscured for Luther and others like him in the Middle Ages until a new reading of the New Testament cleared the dust so that the meaning of God's grace as forgiveness of sinners could be clearly understood again. Luther had been afraid of God's judgment because he knew that he was a sinner. He went to confess his sins to a priest every day, sometimes going to the confessional more than once a day. Luther was the opposite type of personality from those who refuse to acknowledge their guilt. He knew he was guilty and deserved God's punishment. When he came to understand, however, that the message of the New Testament is that God is ready to accept and forgive sinners, he felt the weight of all that guilt lifted from his shoulders and he knew himself to be free for the first time in his life. For Luther, this is the meaning of God's grace, namely, that God is merciful, God is forgiving. To say that we are saved or made right with God by grace alone is to affirm that our relationship with God is made right again by God's willingness to forgive us. For our part, we have to be willing to accept God's forgiveness,

which means that we have to be humble and willing to admit our guilt for wrongdoing. This is what it means to speak of accepting God's grace through our faith. "Grace" means a gift. God's grace is God's mercy, God's forgiveness, freely offered since forgiveness is never owed. Our faith is our trusting acceptance of God's gift of forgiveness; our faith is the assurance that we have truly been forgiven. And once we have understood ourselves as those who have been freely accepted and forgiven by God, this should be sufficient to induce us to be willing to accept and forgive those who wrong us. According to Luther, we cannot accept God's forgiveness of us and yet refuse to grant forgiveness to others. Like the woman in Luke's gospel, the grace of being forgiven should lead us to be loving persons who readily grant forgiveness to others. So, then, these three always belong together in the Christian life: Grace, forgiveness, and love. The gift of grace is God's forgiveness; and having been forgiven by God we become loving people who are also ready to forgive others.

Remember: none of this is required of us. This is gospel, not law. Whereas the law commands, the gospel invites. We are commanded to be just. But we are not required to forgive or to ask for forgiveness. We can live according to the strict requirements of justice, hating those who do wrong to us and being willing to be hated by those we have wronged: an eye for an eye. Love, however, is more than justice. Love seeks reconciliation even when there is injustice. The gospel invites us to a life that is more than pure justice. It invites us to let go of wrongs, to be forgiving and willing to ask for forgiveness; in short, the gospel invites us to live a life of love based on grace. And precisely this is the invitation that Jesus extends to us on God's behalf, on behalf of a God who is described as love in the New Testament (1 John 4:8). On behalf of this God, Jesus prepares a table where sinners can gather together, in joyful celebration that there is forgiveness of sins, ours and theirs, and we can trust in God's grace. For it is only when we can

eat at this table with our Judas that we will understand the freely given love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.